

Designing exercises for listening

Jo McDonough is a Lecturer in the EFL Unit of Essex University. She is author of 'Listening to Lectures' OUP 1978

A INTRODUCTION

As the number of ESP courses being run in many parts of the world increases, so the discussion of principles; definition of aims; syllabus specification; materials design; methodology and technique, is becoming more refined and developed. One important area of research and development is in the sub-field of ESP normally referred to as 'Study Skills' or 'English for Academic Purposes'. Not surprisingly, when looked at on an international scale, an analysis of study situations where English is required reveals that the majority of such situations involve reading as the dominant, or even exclusive, activity. Consequently, and understandably, the emphasis of both research and materials tends to be in this area. However, there are a large number of study situations where students are required, very generally, to listen — to lectures, both formal and informal, to seminar papers, seminar discussions, to science laboratory explanations — and there is at the moment relatively little work on the pedagogical problems involved in designing teaching programmes which include one or more aspects of listening. Nor is there a great deal of specially developed material. I am referring principally to courses run in the UK in a number of institutions for overseas students specialising in a variety of subjects, but the problem is by no means limited to this country. It is the aim of this article to describe one particular approach to designing materials for listening and note-taking in the formal lecture situation. A rationale for the design principle will briefly be presented first, and will be followed by a number of practical examples illustrating the principle.

B PRINCIPLES

An interesting procedure for designing listening and note-taking practice for use in an academic situation is described by James (1977). (i) This involves exercises based on specially written texts, and each text is presented in three forms. 'The first form . . . consists of an overview of the final text, the second . . . consists of an expansion of this overview and the third . . . consists of the final text itself.' (p.93). A different approach, although related, can be found in the materials developed for similar situations by Morley (1972), (ii) who stresses that aural comprehension goes beyond basic auditory discrimination and aural grammar. She uses 'CONTENT areas' for the practice of listening, remembering and note-taking in functional 'CONCEPT areas', for

example numbers, letters, spatial and temporal relationships, and measurement. I would like to suggest an alternative approach to the problem (to be viewed as parallel and not in opposition), based on the use of authentic material. By 'authentic' here I simply mean unscripted audio-recorded university lectures, given by subject-specialist lecturers as part of their normal schedule and therefore in no way simulated or designed as teaching material for the overseas student of English.

One important constraint imposed on a large number, if not the majority, of ESP courses is that of limited time, and on the face of it there is likely to be a positive reaction from students if they feel they are coming to grips with authentic material at an early stage, and with no concessions made such as simplification of the discourse. However, in the absence of text simplification or specially written materials, one might justifiably raise doubts here about level of difficulty, particularly for students of lower proficiency, and a very important factor in the use of authentic (lecture) material is the pedagogical question of sequencing and grading. It is not really sufficient to assume that controlling presentation of the language alone constitutes a grading principle, whether the language is viewed structurally or functionally. Secondly, linguistic grading alone obscures the fact that there are perceptual and psychological factors at work whilst a listener is decoding and processing a message. For example, he needs to be able to segment a stream of noise in order to perceive words, stress and intonation patterns, and grammatical sequences, and to mentally organise the incoming information in such a way that he is able to note it down efficiently enough, by discarding redundant material and perceiving basic points, to recall it, often much later. It seems, therefore, that the focus of attention, pedagogically speaking, should be on the interaction between these factors and the linguistic features of the lecture material, and the sequencing and grading of our teaching material should take this into account. What one is doing is breaking down the listening 'skill' into a sequence of operations, or strategies, of increasing complexity. The types of exercises used will then be very important, because they will be the point of amalgamation of linguistic and psychological considerations, and will ideally constitute stepping stones towards full understanding.

I should like now to give some examples of exercise types used in this way. The examples will basically consist of a list, but some of the exercises will be shown in more detail. The main sequencing principle is to move from 'localised'

BACKGROUND

listening, where students are given practice in understanding individual items and small segments of language, via various transitional strategies to 'global' (or 'semantic') listening, where verbatim recall and note-taking are impossible, and where the listener has to extract key information from longer stretches of discourse. (The James article referred to above has a similar sequence of '(i) decoding (ii) comprehending (iii) taking notes' (p.89).

C EXAMPLES

- 1 Blank-filling of subject-specific } items
 general lexical }
 structural }

Example

Listen to the extract from the lecture on your tape. Some important words connected with the subject-matter of the lecture have been left out. As you listen, try to write those words in the blanks. Check your answer in the transcript.

Now, what definitions can one offer you? Professor T. H. Marshall, who is seen generally as one of the most distinguished, er, (*sociologists*) in the history of (*sociology*) in this country, defines social policy as 'a (*policy*) of governments with regard to action having a direct impact on the (*welfare*) of citizens by providing them with (*services*) or (*income*)'.

NB. Extracts chosen would usually be longer than this. The items in brackets are the words that the student would fill in from the aural stimulus of the tape.

- 2 Completion of statements — to recognise, for instance, aims of lecture; key points; definitions.

Example

Listen to the extract on your tape, then complete the statements below, using the exact words spoken by the lecturer.

- i Every living organism is (*a machine*).
- ii Some such machines, such as unicellular plants,

and unicellular animals, such as amoeba, are (*very simple*).

- iii A computer is never as complex as the complexity of (*the multicellular living organism*).

NB: Items to be added by students are again shown in brackets.

- 3 Identifying patterns of regular stress — to recognise that stressed words carry key information, and are therefore important in note-taking. (And, incidentally, in a whole range of language activity: compare the language of telegrams and newspaper headlines.)

- 4 Numerical recognition and tabulated information.

Example

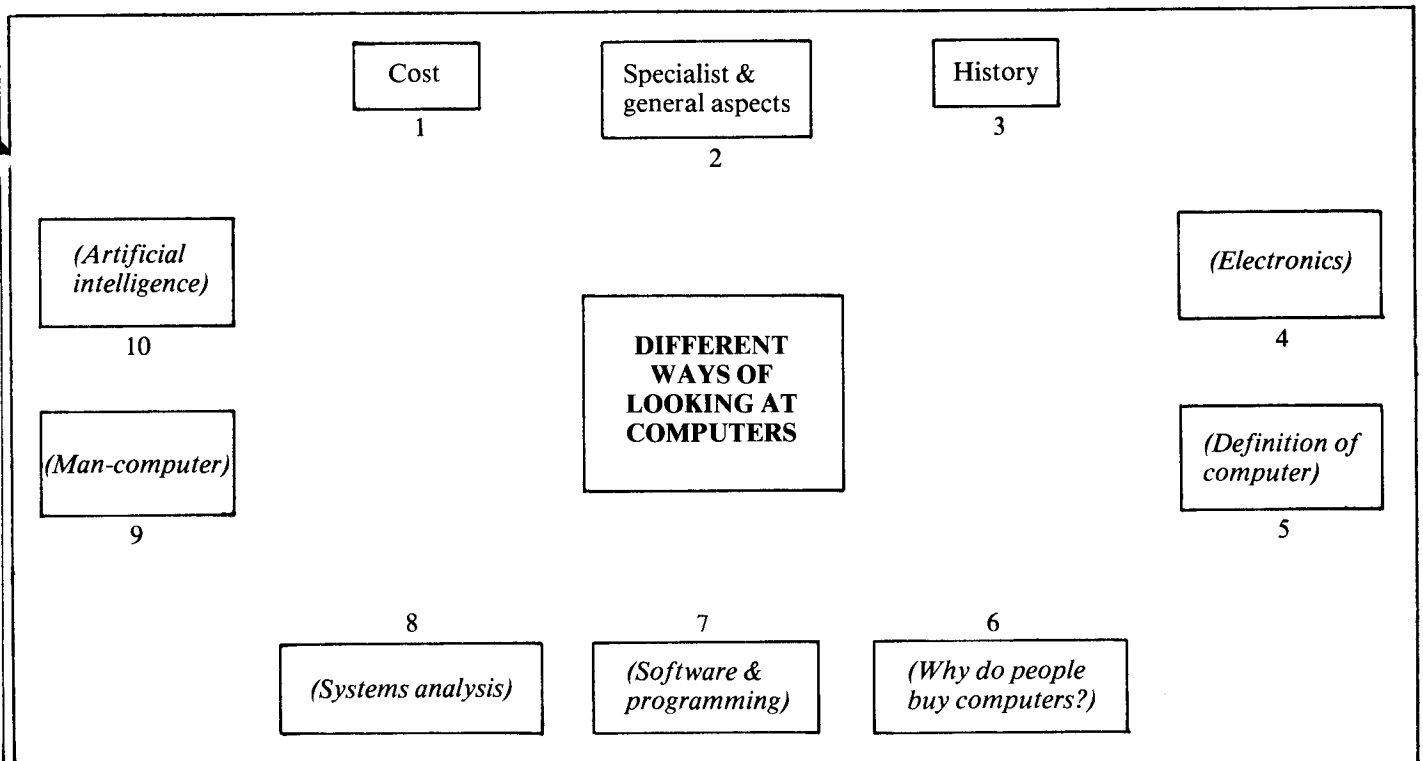
Listen to the extract on your tape, and in the table, enter the figures that the lecturer gives next to each country. (These indicate percentage of gross domestic product.)

| Country | Figure |
|-----------------------------|---------|
| Netherlands | (14.1%) |
| Belgium | (14.1%) |
| U K | (7.7%) |
| Ireland | (6.4%) |
| Average for E E C Countries | (10.6%) |

- 5 Completion of diagram showing the structure of (part of) lecture, for example via the labelling of key items.

Example

The diagram shows the structure of this part of the lecture. As you listen, try to fill in the empty boxes. Each box should show *one* aspect of computing. The first three have been done for you.

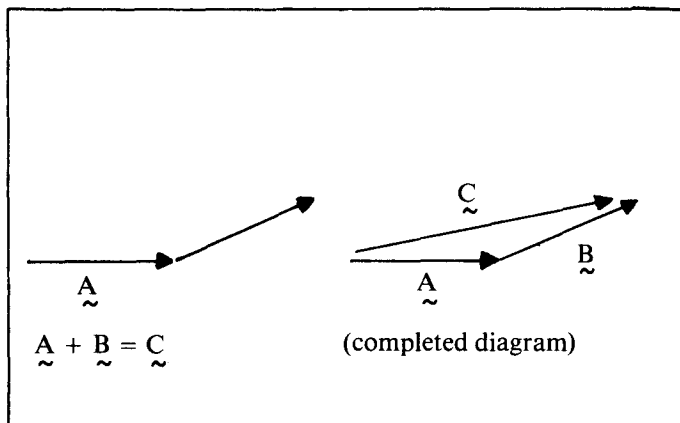


BACKGROUND

6 Completion of subject-specific diagrams.

Example

Listen carefully to the extract. First complete the diagram, then write out the rule in vector algebra.



- 7 Underlining key information in the transcript and bracketing repeated or less important information. This is a useful transitional exercise which helps, for example, in the recognition of redundant features.
- 8 Matching statements, for example by rewriting statements made in the lecture and asking students to locate them in the discourse. This is again very useful for the recognition of repetition and redundancy.
- 9 Identifying reference, for instance pronouns. This is useful with items referring to something some distance away in the discourse. (e.g. "Having said *this* . . . " when the lecturer may be referring to a number of previous points).
- 10 Lexical collocation. Discourse is often cohesive because of a number of lexical items being related in meaning. (This is similar in some ways to exercises on reference.)

Example

The lecturer is talking about 'homeostasis', and points out that it does not mean the same as 'stagnation'. How many words or phrases can you hear in the extract that are similar in meaning to the word 'stagnation'?

- 11 Recognition of functions; for example, recognising when a speaker is defining, giving examples, classifying, comparing and contrasting; making a sequence of points.
- 12 Prediction. It is often the case, for instance, that a word carries a strong stress because the speaker is con-

trasting it with something else. Students can be asked to predict what the first stressed word is going to be contrasted with.

Example

I've talked about some of the advantages, now I'm going to turn to . . .

- 13 Questions (open-ended and multiple choice), and particularly true/false statements, to help students make inferences.
- 14 Using some of the above to begin note-taking, for example practising some obvious principles of linguistic omission and reduction over short stretches of discourse. (Including standard abbreviations.)
- 15 Completion of a note-taking framework. (This can also include supplying a framework that contains some false information.)
- 16 Note-taking task with props removed.

D CONCLUSION

I am not suggesting, of course, that a sequence such as that shown here should be rigidly adhered to: obviously some exercises can be adapted to fit earlier/later in the sequence according to the aims of the programme and the teacher. Nor am I claiming that the exercises should be regarded as discrete and separate from each other, or, most important, that the list is anything like exhaustive. I am simply trying to suggest that, given certain types of teaching situation, it may be more profitable and economical to design exercises on the basis of authentic spoken materials, rather than to assume the necessity of beginning with simplified or specially written material. Furthermore, I would maintain that grading of exercises is then more valid than linguistic grading, because it enables the teacher/materials designer to sequence the whole listening activity. Finally, there is no reason why 'authentic spoken materials' should refer only to lectures, and many of the exercise types are adaptable for use with a wide variety of spoken discourse.

Note

I am indebted to the University of Essex for permission to use some lectures in the preparation of materials.

For materials of this type, see Jo McDonough: *Listening to Lectures*, OUP 1978.

References

- (i) James, K. (1977): 'Note-taking in lectures: problems and strategies'. In: *English for Academic Purposes*, BAAL/SELMOUS.
- (ii) Morley, J. (1972): *Improving Aural Comprehension*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.

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